

Report

New River Gorge National River, Gauley River National Recreation Area, and Bluestone National Scenic River

■ 1.0 Site Description

The New River Gorge National River (NR), the Gauley River National Recreation Area (NRA), and the Bluestone National Scenic River (NSR) are an interrelated group of the NPS-administered recreational areas in southern West Virginia. The New River Gorge NR was established in 1978 to preserve and protect a 53-mile-long stretch of the New River as a free-flowing waterway. This unit of the NPS encompasses over 70,000 acres of land along the New River between the towns of Hinton and Fayetteville. The Park and the surrounding area are rich in cultural and natural history, and contain an abundance of scenic and recreational opportunities.

Both the Bluestone NSR and the Gauley River NRA were added to the NPS in 1988. The Bluestone NSR unit encompasses an area of approximately 4,290 acres along an 11-mile section of the Bluestone River south of Hinton, West Virginia. The Gauley River NRA encompasses approximately 11,145 acres along 25 miles of the free-flowing Gauley River and six miles of the Meadow River. The Bluestone and Gauley River units are co-managed by the NPS and the West Virginia Department of Natural Resources.

The principal attraction of all three of these jointly administered units are white water rafting, kayaking, and fishing along the respective portions of the Bluestone, New, Gauley, and Meadow Rivers. Camping and picnicking are also popular recreational activities at these units.

The NPS Visitor Centers are located at Canyon Rim, Thurmond Depot, Grandview, and Hinton. The Canyon Rim Visitor Center is open year-round, while the others are open seasonally (May to September). All of these units are open for public use throughout the year. No entrance fees are charged for admission to any of these Park units.

In 1998, New River Gorge NR recorded 1,197,649 visitors, Gauley River NRA recorded 230,226 visitors and Bluestone NSR recorded 56,983 visitors. Visitation levels at these units have exhibited moderate increases over the past few years.

A General Management Plan (GMP) was prepared for the New River Gorge NR shortly after its establishment, and Development Concept Plans have been prepared for each major subarea and unit of the larger complex. An update of the GMP is anticipated in the next few years. No comprehensive transportation plan has been developed for the area.

■ 2.0 Existing ATS

At the present time, there are several privately operated Alternative Transportation Systems (ATS) services in the area. These are seasonal in nature, and use converted school buses and similar vehicles to transport white water rafters and kayakers to and from the New and Gauley Rivers.

An aerial tram system exists at the southern end of Bluestone NSR to connect the river proper with the adjoining Pipestem Resort State Park facilities on the rim of the gorge. This tram system is owned and operated by the West Virginia Department of Natural Resources.

During its initial years of operation, a visitor shuttle was operated at the Thurmond Depot Visitor Center. Opposition to the provision of on-site parking by the CSX Railroad required an NPS contract operation by the local public transportation authority of a seasonal shuttle bus service from a 150-space parking area on the west side of the New River to the Depot Visitor Center. However, following subsequent negotiations with the railroad, an 18-space parking area was provided at the Visitor Center. As a result, there are now only two to three days per year when off-site parking is required. With the need for on-site parking having thus been accommodated, the \$30,000 per year shuttle bus contract was terminated several years ago.

Following the rehabilitation of the Fayette Station Bridge across the New River below the high-level New River Gorge Bridge on U.S. Route 19, several private companies have begun to offer shuttle bus tours from the Canyon Rim Visitor Center across the Fayette Station Bridge to the community of Fayetteville.

The “Cardinal” provides Amtrak service to the area three days per week. This train operates between Washington, DC and Chicago via Charleston, West Virginia and Cincinnati, Ohio. The local stop is at Hinton, West Virginia. In addition, a scenic tour train operates through the gorge during September and October. This train makes a scheduled stop at the Thurmond Depot Visitor Center. It is not uncommon for 1,000 persons to be on board this tour train, all of whom get off to tour Thurmond. In the view of the NPS staff, this creates an accident potential since the same rail corridor handles a number of freight trains each day.

■ 3.0 ATS Needs

Although the NPS staff expressed a desire to have visitors leave their cars and tour the area via some form of ATS, they did not believe that either the nature of the visitors or the nature of their activities were generally conducive to this. Specifically, most visitors to these units are there for active recreational activities (i.e., white water rafting, rock climbing, etc.) and thus have quite a bit of equipment to transport with them.

The most likely ATS potential cited by the NPS staff was the need for a seasonal shuttle service from the roads along the ridges overlooking the New River Gorge and the Gauley

River to the expanding number of rafting access points along the rivers themselves. The view was expressed that any such demand would probably be provided by the private sector, operating under a permit issued by the NPS.

Another ATS potential noted by the NPS staff was a concept suggested by a local entrepreneur for initiation of a scenic railroad between the NPS headquarters at Glen Jean and Thurmond.

A final ATS-related potential noted by the NPS staff was a proposed 15-mile-long rails to trails project along the Gauley River. Transfer of this right-of-way from the CSX Corporation to the NPS is currently being discussed.

■ 4.0 Basis of ATS Needs

At the present time, it appears that any identified ATS needs are being responded to by the private sector. These needs also appear to be very seasonal in nature.

In the absence of a recent GMP or a comprehensive transportation plan for the area, the NPS staff did not foresee the need for any additional ATS services for these Park units.

■ 5.0 Bibliography

National Park Service, Official Map and Brochure, New River Gorge National River, 1999.

National Park Service, New River Gorge National River Web site
(<http://www.nps.gov/neri/>) Visited November 16, 1999.

National Park Service, Gauley River National Recreation Area Web site
(<http://www.nps.gov/gari/>) Visited November 16, 1999.

National Park Service, Bluestone National Scenic River Web site
(<http://www.nps.gov/blue/>) Visited November 16, 1999.

■ 6.0 Persons Interviewed

Peter Hart, Superintendent, New River Gorge National River